

Office of the Inspector General

September 29, 2000

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Deputy Commissioner
of Social Security

Inspector General

Management Advisory Report – Contact Stations (A-04-99-01001)

The attached final Management Advisory Report presents the results of our review. Our objective was to evaluate the Social Security Administration's business decisions for locating and maintaining approximately 1,000 contact stations. This included an assessment of the services being provided at the contact stations.

Please comment within 60 days from the date of this memorandum on corrective action taken or planned on each recommendation. If you wish to discuss the final report, please call me or have your staff contact Steven L. Schaeffer, Assistant Inspector General for Audit, at (410) 965-9700.

James G. Huse, Jr.

Attachment

**OFFICE OF
THE INSPECTOR GENERAL**

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

CONTACT STATIONS

September 2000

A-04-99-01001

**MANAGEMENT
ADVISORY REPORT**



Mission

We improve SSA programs and operations and protect them against fraud, waste, and abuse by conducting independent and objective audits, evaluations, and investigations. We provide timely, useful, and reliable information and advice to Administration officials, the Congress, and the public.

Authority

The Inspector General Act created independent audit and investigative units, called the Office of Inspector General (OIG). The mission of the OIG, as spelled out in the Act, is to:

- Conduct and supervise independent and objective audits and investigations relating to agency programs and operations.**
- Promote economy, effectiveness, and efficiency within the agency.**
- Prevent and detect fraud, waste, and abuse in agency programs and operations.**
- Review and make recommendations regarding existing and proposed legislation and regulations relating to agency programs and operations.**
- Keep the agency head and the Congress fully and currently informed of problems in agency programs and operations.**

To ensure objectivity, the IG Act empowers the IG with:

- Independence to determine what reviews to perform.**
- Access to all information necessary for the reviews.**
- Authority to publish findings and recommendations based on the reviews.**

Vision

By conducting independent and objective audits, investigations, and evaluations, we are agents of positive change striving for continuous improvement in the Social Security Administration's programs, operations, and management and in our own office.

Executive Summary

OBJECTIVE

The objective of the review was to evaluate the Social Security Administration's (SSA) business decisions for locating and maintaining approximately 1,000 contact stations. This included an assessment of the services being provided at the contact stations.

BACKGROUND

SSA continually strives to meet customer service expectations through its network of field offices and contact stations. SSA's ability to serve its customers will not only impact the public's perception of SSA, it can have a long-term impact on the public's perception of Federal service as a whole.

Contact stations are an integral part of SSA's service delivery network. Managed through SSA's field offices, contact stations are usually located in remote areas to provide service to individuals who lack transportation or telephone access. With the advent of the toll-free number telephone service, much of the business previously conducted at contact stations can now be accomplished over the telephone. While there will always be a need to conduct face-to-face business, providing that service through a network of remote contact stations has become less of a necessity and more of a convenience for SSA customers.

We reviewed the management of contact stations in the three regions with the highest numbers of contact stations. We conducted on-site reviews at field offices and nine associated contact stations in Illinois, Wisconsin, Texas, and Georgia from February through March 1999. We interviewed staff members in regional offices, area director offices, field offices, and contact stations.

RESULTS OF REVIEW

Contact stations were providing needed services in remote areas, as determined necessary by field office management. Generally, we found individual contact stations to be well managed. As a result, we elected not to perform additional audit work. However, we made some observations in areas we believe could be improved with additional management focus and attention. These additional actions will provide SSA customers with better service, contact station staff a more secure and productive workplace, and managers a basis for making staffing decisions at contact stations.

DESIGN LONG-RANGE PLANS FOR CONTACT STATIONS

Regions had different approaches for managing contact stations. One region instructed its field office managers to continually monitor the viability of service locations, including

contact stations, by performing periodic service delivery assessments. Service delivery assessments provide managers an opportunity to analyze a service area's workload and demographic data, the types of services delivered, any problems with accessibility, and any trends noted in the analysis. Based on the information collected, regular staffing at nonproductive contact stations might be reduced or ended with service provided by appointment only. The two other regions we visited did not have a coordinated approach to regularly monitor and evaluate the need for individual contact stations. Management had a "hands-off" attitude, relying on the field office managers to analyze and control contact station operations. While service delivery assessments were required, field offices in these two regions had not routinely performed an analysis since 1997.

IMPROVE CONTACT STATION FACILITIES

Space at contact stations was not configured to provide basic security for assigned field office staff. One field office employee usually staffs a contact station. At the contact stations we visited, employees had no emergency exit or security backup should a customer become confrontational or aggressive. There were no barriers or duress alarms installed to protect the individuals from a direct threat from the public, as recommended in the contact station security procedures established by the National Safety Partnership Committee for Security.¹

Contact station employees also had problems connecting to SSA computer systems. Employees need the ability to link into SSA computers and programs to maximize their efficiency while working at remote contact stations. However, it was difficult for personnel to provide complete service because some sites lacked dedicated telephone lines or there were problems connecting to the mainframe using existing equipment. In July 2000, the Office of Telecommunications and Systems Operations began a pilot roll-out of new remote access technology in two regions that will improve remote connections to SSA systems. While we are encouraged that SSA is taking steps to improve remote connectivity, short-term solutions need to be found until the new technology is available in all regions and contact stations.

INVENTORY AND ADVERTISE CONTACT STATIONS AND ALTERNATIVES

The Office of the Deputy Commissioner for Operations' (DCO) inventory of contact stations was not correct. DCO initially provided a summary that showed 1,445 contact stations nationwide. However, the total number of contact stations reported did not agree with the detailed information the regions provided us. In response to our subsequent inquiries, the regions began to adjust the numbers of contact stations they were reporting to DCO. As of September 1999, DCO was reporting 1,030 contact stations. However, as of August 1999, we could only identify 963 contact stations that were regularly open to the public. This count was 482 locations less than DCO reported

¹ *Contact Station and Office of Hearings and Appeals Remote Hearing Site Security*, issued for action by the National Health and Safety Partnership Committee for Security on December 14, 1997.

as operational in October 1998. Without an accurate inventory, DCO cannot be certain which communities have a physical SSA presence and which do not.

In addition, while establishing the contact station inventory, we noted that field office managers were not maintaining current information on their contact stations in the 800-Number Appointment System. This System is used to provide the public various types of information on services available at contact stations. Of the 963 contact stations we identified, 208 were not listed on the information and referral screens. We also noted instances where operating hours had been reduced or changed, but the 800-Number Appointment System records had not been updated. Consequently, DCO had incorrect information on the communities served and the extent of services provided. Without accurate records of these facilities, SSA cannot provide the public up-to-date information on sites and available services.

Contact stations were not always advertised through the local media. The media often will provide SSA free advertising in the form of public service announcements. For contact stations slated for closure, customers might be encouraged to use the 800-number to conduct their SSA business. Toll-free service is a key component in providing world-class service to SSA customers while reducing the demand on field office resources. If resources are to be effectively used at contact stations, SSA should routinely advertise all remote services.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While contact stations were generally managed well, the common conditions discussed in this report warrant further management attention. The proposed recommended actions will improve contact station viability and ensure field office resources are used efficiently and effectively.

We recommend that DCO:

- Require that regions comply with establishing long-range coordinated plans for managing contact station operations. Specific reviews of contact station workloads could be accomplished through the annual service delivery assessments already required by DCO.
- Instruct the regions to review contact station sites to ensure they meet the basic requirements for conducting SSA business. This would include security for contact station staff and access to SSA systems to facilitate the work performed.
- Ensure the contact station inventory is accurate, and the site information included in the 800-Number Appointment System is current.

- Direct regions to advertise the availability of SSA services by:
 - Using local media to promote the services offered at contact stations or alternative service mechanisms if the intention is to reduce contact station service.
 - Actively promoting use of the 800-number to reduce customer demand at contact stations slated for closure.

AGENCY COMMENTS

SSA generally agreed with three of our four recommendations. However, regarding remote access at contact stations, SSA maintains that connectivity problems are being resolved when they are brought to SSA management's attention. Also, SSA does not see a need to further instruct the regions to advertise the availability of contact station services or alternative SSA services because the regions are already granted the authority and discretion to advertise.

SSA provided additional technical comments on the new remote access technologies that are incorporated in this final report. The full text of SSA's comments is included in Appendix A.

OIG RESPONSE

We are pleased that SSA has taken, or will be taking, proactive steps to address our findings. However, in response to the remote access issue, while we do not take exception to SSA's contention that reported problems are corrected, we do pose that many problems may be unreported. Therefore, we continue to recommend that SSA attempt to identify contact stations that have connectivity problems and resolve the technical issues. This action will not only improve employee performance, it will ensure better customer service. Both the Office of the Inspector General and SSA agree on the need for an accurate contact station inventory and information on contact station operations. SSA reports that a new system will be available shortly that will provide more detailed field office information. However, we remain concerned that the new system, like the old system, will depend on managers for updates. We found the information in the old system to be unreliable. Also, while SSA maintains that the authority and discretion to advertise already exists, and that print material such as the 800-number is provided to field offices for advertising alternative services, we found media advertising to be inconsistent or lacking. In addition, we saw no evidence of the referenced printed advertising at the contact stations visited. Therefore, we continue to recommend that the regions be reminded of the importance of maintaining accurate contact station information in Agency systems and advertising all of SSA's increasing array of services.

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Introduction

OBJECTIVE

Our objective was to evaluate the Social Security Administration's (SSA) business decisions for locating and maintaining approximately 1,000 contact stations. This included an assessment of the services being provided at the contact stations.

BACKGROUND

SSA continually strives to meet customer service expectations. An essential part of SSA's service to the public is to provide information about its programs and services. Under its "one-stop-shopping" policy, SSA also provides assistance on programs and services offered through other public and voluntary agencies. Because SSA serves in this capacity, much of the public could naturally conclude there is an interrelationship between SSA and the other Government social service agencies whether Federal, State or local. SSA may frequently be the only Federal agency the public directly contacts. Hence, providing prompt, courteous service that is easily accessible through its network of field offices and contact stations will not only impact SSA's ability to meet its customer service goals, but can have a positive long-term impact on the public's perception of Federal service as a whole.

Contact stations are an integral part of SSA's service delivery network. Managed through SSA's field offices, contact stations are usually located in remote areas to provide service to individuals who lack transportation or telephone access. However, with the advent of the toll-free number telephone service, much of the business previously conducted at contact stations can be accomplished over the telephone. While there will always be a need to conduct face-to-face business, providing that service through a network of remote contact stations has become less of a necessity and more of a convenience for SSA customers.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

We performed this review because of concerns regional staff expressed over the use of contact stations. Regional staff believed services provided at many contact stations could be scaled back or eliminated entirely without adversely impacting the overall quality of the service provided in these communities. In certain instances, regional staff viewed contact stations as an unproductive drain on field office resources. We designed our review to address that concern.

At the beginning of our survey, the Office of the Deputy Commissioner for Operations (DCO) provided a regional summary that reported 1,445 contact stations. Using this inventory, we reviewed the management of contact stations in the 3 regions with the

highest numbers of contact stations—Chicago (350), Atlanta (341), and Dallas (283).¹ These three regions accounted for 67.4 percent of all contact stations. We conducted on-site reviews at field offices and nine associated contact stations in Illinois (two), Wisconsin (one), Texas (four), and Georgia (two) from February through March 1999. We interviewed staff members in regional offices, area director offices, field offices, and contact stations.

¹ We derived contact station totals from a DCO summary provided on October 9, 1998.

Results of Review

Overall, field office managers were managing their contact stations well. While we did not find any conditions that warranted further audit development, we are recommending some changes. These changes are intended to provide: (1) SSA customers with better service, (2) contact station staff a more secure and productive workplace, and (3) managers a basis for making staffing decisions at contact stations.

DESIGN LONG-RANGE PLANS FOR CONTACT STATIONS

During our visits, we noted different approaches among the managers. One regional office instructed its field office managers to continually monitor the viability of service locations, including contact stations, by performing periodic service delivery assessments. Through this process, managers could measure the impact of retaining contact stations with little productivity. Regional office policies specifically instructed field office managers to track contact station customer traffic, the types of service requested, and whether the contact station is the best means for providing service to the community. In 20 percent of its field offices, this region annually collected data used to determine whether the contact stations remained beneficial to the community and SSA. Based on the information collected, regular staffing at nonproductive contact stations might be reduced or ended with service provided by appointment only. Regional staff believed reducing a contact station's hours to appointment only would avoid the "politics" of closing a contact station outright. During our survey, this region officially closed 88, about 25 percent, of its contact stations.

The two other regions we visited did not have a coordinated approach to regularly monitor and evaluate the need for individual contact stations. Three contact station managers used customer sign-in sheets to document the number of visitors. However, other managers relied totally on verbal reports from the contact station staff to document work performed. Collected formally or informally, workload information can aid the field office manager in evaluating contact stations' operating hours or the need to close a contact station when the workload drops to the point where staffing can no longer be justified. Information on the types of service requested could also benefit managers by allowing them to make informed decisions on the extent of service that will be offered at a particular contact station. Without workload information, the manager has no documented basis for making staffing decisions. We noted that, in three of the six contact stations we visited in these regions, customer traffic did not appear to support the resources dedicated. We also observed claims customers turned away because the assigned contact station staff was not authorized to take claims.

In these two regions, management had a "hands-off" attitude, relying on field office managers to analyze and control contact station operations. Field office managers in these regions indicated it was often difficult to modify service or close contact stations. Staff in one region stated efforts to close contact stations had been thwarted, in part,

because of perceived political pressure. However, we were unable to establish this as the rudimentary cause for SSA not closing the contact stations. Instead, the cause seemed to be more aligned with the regional offices' inability to effectively demonstrate, through an assessment of service delivery, that a contact station was no longer viable and that services could be provided more efficiently using alternative methods. While service delivery assessments were required, these two regions had not routinely performed an analysis since 1997.

DCO should remind the regional offices of the importance of developing long-range regional plans for contact stations. DCO should conduct annual service delivery assessments at select contact stations and specifically address workload management issues. Minimum standards should be established so decisions to change the level of service or operating hours or to close a location can be clearly justified based on reliable workload data. Through proactive contact station management, field office managers will be more assured that contact station operations are providing value by fulfilling customer needs that cannot be otherwise provided.

IMPROVE CONTACT STATION FACILITIES

During our contact station visits, we found that most did not afford ample security for the on-site field office staff as set forth in Agency procedures.² There were also problems connecting to SSA's systems. Without on-line access, contact station staff was limited in the work it could perform. Once a manager determines, based on workload information, that a contact station is beneficial to the community and should remain open, the manager should take steps to improve on-site security and available technical resources.

Security Considerations

Space at the contact stations was not configured to provide basic security for assigned field office staff. Usually, one field office employee staffs a contact station. At the stations we visited, employees had no emergency exit or security backup should a customer become confrontational or aggressive. There were no barriers or duress alarms installed to protect the individual from a direct threat from the public, as recommended in the contact station security procedures established by the National Safety Partnership Committee for Security.

Although none of the staff we talked with had experienced an incident where a customer had become violent, they did not feel secure when working at contact stations. Staff stated there had not been any customers they "couldn't handle," but they noted customers did get angry and vent their frustrations. One representative discussed a customer who stormed out of the office and intentionally knocked down and broke a sign indicating the location of the contact station.

² *Contact Station and OHA Remote Hearing Site Security*, issued for action by the National Health and Safety Partnership Committee for Security on December 14, 1997.

Field office managers expressed frustration with trying to find secure and pleasant facilities for contact station locations. Finding a suitable site is particularly difficult in remote areas where free space is limited, which hampers the field office managers' efforts. This often leaves the contact station in a less-than-desirable location. In one field office, only male representatives were selected to visit the contact station because the field office manager felt uncomfortable sending female employees.

Because of the potential employee risk if a customer becomes unruly or belligerent, DCO should review contact station security arrangements to establish minimum requirements. Unlike field office representatives, contact station representatives do not have the security of other employees to come to their aid in a confrontational situation. Therefore, contact stations that do not meet basic security standards should be relocated or provided with some other type of security (for example, on-site contract security).

Equipment Needs

SSA representatives need the ability to link into SSA computers and programs to maximize their efficiency while working at remote contact stations. During our visits, we noted it was difficult for personnel to provide complete service because network technology was not always available. For example, some sites lacked dedicated telephone lines or there were problems connecting to the mainframe using existing equipment.

Eight of the nine contact stations we visited had laptop computers available to temporarily connect to the mainframe computer via telephone lines; the ninth had a permanent connection to the mainframe computer. Four of the eight representatives indicated their laptops worked infrequently or not at all because of connectivity problems. Without the ability to connect to SSA's mainframe, employees can only gather and review paper documents. They cannot verify benefit amounts, complete input for new Social Security cards, or take claims. These tasks must be completed at the field office and the documents mailed back to the owner at a later date.

SSA systems staff indicated that improvements are being made in remote connectivity. Remote local area network (LAN) access capability is provided to SSA employees through a private network that uses a Remote LAN Node (RLN) product. SSA originally acquired this product to provide 3270-mainframe access for field office employees to assist in taking claims. Over the last 2 years, it has become the standard for all dial-up access to SSANet and E-mail because of its strong security features. However, the RLN product was a first generation remote access tool that did not perform well in today's client server environment. There were complaints from SSA's user community about line drops and slow connection speeds with the RLN solution. In 1999, the Office of Systems began searching for a RLN replacement. The Office of Telecommunications and Systems Operations (OTSO) has updated SSA internal architecture, which will allow SSA to join the technical mainstream and take advantage of the latest Internet technology to access SSANet. In July 2000, OTSO began the pilot

roll-out phase of the new remote access technology in two regions that will be carried over a Virtual Private Network. This new method to connect to SSANet from remote locations will provide a more secure path to move data, offer increased user capacity as compared to RLN, and improve connection stability and user access speed.

While we are encouraged that SSA is making strides to improve remote connectivity, we are concerned about the time needed to implement this technology in all regions. SSA needs to evaluate the network technology used by the staff at contact stations, particularly in those regions not included in the pilot, to identify and resolve lingering problems with hardware and connectivity. Correcting these problems would increase field office employee productivity in the interim and improve the level of service provided to the field office's remote customers.

INVENTORY AND ADVERTISE CONTACT STATIONS AND ALTERNATIVES

SSA's contact station inventory and operating information were not accurate. In addition, contact station operations were not always advertised through the local media. Customers routinely need information on the operating status of contact stations and any alternative means of service available. Field office managers should first consider the customer's own preference and convenience when selecting a means of service. Therefore, contact stations that are to remain open should be aggressively advertised. When a contact station is to be closed, field office managers should take a proactive approach to advertise alternative means of service.

Contact Station Inventory

During our survey, we determined DCO's inventory of contact stations was not correct. The total number of contact stations reported did not agree with the detailed information the regions provided us. In preparing for this review, DCO provided a summary showing 1,445 contact stations nationwide. DCO had been reporting about 1,400 contact stations since September 1997. In our initial analysis, we determined the numbers DCO was reporting, including those for the Chicago, Atlanta, and Dallas regions, did not agree with the numbers DCO provided us. In our attempts to reconcile the differences, we accessed SSA's 800-Number Appointment System information and referral screens.³ If the contact station information on these screens conflicted with the information we had been given, we made direct contact with the jurisdictional field office to confirm the contact station was operational. We found that many listed sites were not operational while other sites were in use, but not listed in the inventory. This occurred because the regions were not reporting accurate and complete contact station information to DCO.

³ The 800-Number Appointment System contains descriptive information about service locations and services provided by SSA field offices and through other community providers. The field office managers maintain this information.

In response to our inquiries, the regions began to adjust the numbers of contact stations they were reporting to DCO. While DCO initially reported 1,445 contact stations, it had revised the number of contact stations to 1,286 by our entrance conference in January 1999. By March 1999, DCO had again reduced the number to 1,264. As of September 1999, DCO was reporting 1,030 contact stations. However, as of August 1999, we could only identify 963 contact stations that were regularly open to the public. This count was 482 locations fewer than DCO reported as operational in October 1998. Without an accurate inventory, DCO cannot be certain which communities have a physical SSA presence and which do not.

800-Number Appointment System Updates

Field office managers were not updating information for their contact stations in the 800-Number Appointment System. Telephone service representatives (TSR) and others use this system to obtain various types of SSA information including directing the public for service. Field office managers are instructed to use SSA's information screens on the 800-Number Appointment System to note the presence of contact stations. Specifically, the "Remarks" section of the screen should list items of interest, such as directions to the field office, hours of operation, the services provided, and whether the contact station staff accepts appointments for customers. TSRs use this information to provide the location of easiest service to customers that require an in-person interview. In some instances, the TSR may be able to establish an appointment time for the customer at the contact station. We found 208 of 963 contact stations we identified as of August 1999 were not listed on the information and referral screens. Subsequent calls to the field offices revealed that SSA representatives regularly visited these 208 contact stations.

We also noted instances where operating hours had been reduced, but the 800-Number Appointment System records had not been updated. Consequently, DCO had incorrect information on the communities served and the extent of services provided. Without accurate records of these facilities, the public cannot be provided up-to-date information on sites and available services. Because DCO only tracks the summary totals of regional contact stations, the individual field office managers must be relied on to keep the information in the 800-Number Appointment System up-to-date. If the contact station information is outdated, customers may be unnecessarily inconvenienced.

Advertise Contact Stations and Alternative Services

Contact stations were not always advertised through the local media. The Program Operations Manual System (POMS) provides guidance for advertising SSA services in local newspapers or on the radio.⁴ Often, these sources will provide SSA advertising free. Of the contact stations we visited, three were advertised over the radio, two were advertised in local newspapers, and three were advertised through other means such

⁴ POMS DG 20030.001, DG 20020.000

as Senior Citizens Center newsletters. Two of the contact stations were advertised strictly by word of mouth. If resources are to be effectively used at contact stations, SSA should routinely advertise all remote services.

In addition, when contact stations are deemed candidates for reduced service or closure, the field office manager should take a proactive approach to advertise alternative means of service by distributing printed materials at the contact station or through the local media. Field office managers should first consider the customer's preference and convenience when selecting a means of service. However, by advertising the availability of alternative services, customers will have more choices and the demand for remote services may be reduced. For example, field office managers could promote using the 800-number or directly contacting the field office.

We noted during our visits that many field office representatives were not providing printed SSA materials on alternative services. In particular, staff was not encouraging customers to use the toll-free number service. Toll-free service is a key component in providing world-class service to SSA customers while reducing the demand on field office resources. Customers may call the 800-number to have a claim taken over the phone or to find out where the nearest field office is located. SSA's promotional literature emphasizes that the representatives on the 800-number can handle a variety of needs, often making an in-person visit unnecessary. SSA has expended a great deal of effort to inform the public of this service and to find new ways of using the 800-number.

In eight of the nine contact stations visited, employees did not actively support the 800-number by encouraging customers to use the service. In six of the nine contact stations, we looked for printed literature on services available through the 800-number, but found none. Contact station employees openly expressed a lack of confidence in the accuracy of the data provided through the 800-number and routinely referred customers to a field office instead of directing them to use the 800-number. There may be a number of reasons why this is occurring. While we did not determine the pervasiveness of this lack of support for the 800-number, we are presenting this information for management's analysis in the interest of promoting seamless customer service.

Field office managers should fully advertise contact stations by using all available advertising media. SSA customers need to be able to find accurate information on remote locations and the services available. If contact stations are not amply advertised, SSA may be missing an opportunity to provide service that is most convenient to its customers in these remote areas. In addition, if alternative service mechanisms are not advertised, limited resources may be ineffectively used providing a service that could otherwise be provided in a more economical manner.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, we concluded that field office managers were managing their individual contact stations well. While we did not find any conditions that warranted further audit development, we are recommending some changes. To improve contact station operations, we recommend that DCO:

1. Require that regions comply with establishing long-range coordinated plans for managing contact station operations. Specific reviews of contact station workloads could be accomplished through the annual service delivery assessments already required by DCO.
2. Instruct the regions to review contact station sites to ensure they meet the basic requirements for conducting SSA business. This would include security for contact station staff and access to SSA systems to facilitate the work performed.
3. Ensure the contact station inventory is accurate, and the site information included in the 800-Number Appointment System is up-to-date.
4. Direct regions to advertise the availability of SSA services by:
 - Using local media to promote the services offered at contact stations or alternative service mechanisms if the intention is to reduce contact station service.
 - Actively promoting use of the 800-number to reduce customer demand at contact stations slated for closure.

AGENCY COMMENTS

Overall, SSA agreed with, or has taken action on, three of our four recommendations. SSA agreed that regions should regularly analyze field facilities, including contact stations, to ensure that service delivery is consistent with the needs of the area being served. Regarding security at contact stations, SSA agreed with our intent but not the proposed corrective action. Instead of instructing the regions to review contact station security, SSA's Office of Finance, Assessment and Management (OFAM) has arranged for a security contractor to conduct security reviews at a sample of contact stations. OFAM will also be conducting its own review of contact station security. Regarding access to SSA systems, SSA believes connectivity problems are being resolved when they are brought to SSA management's attention. SSA concurred that contact stations should be accurately inventoried but disagreed with our reported count. SSA reported that a new system, the Detailed Office/Organization Resource System (DOORS), will be

coming on-line and can provide more detailed office information, such as directions and office hours. SSA does not believe there is a need to instruct regions to directly advertise services at contact stations or alternative SSA services because regions are already granted the authority and discretion to advertise.

SSA provided additional technical comments on remote access technologies that are incorporated in this final report. The full text of SSA's comments is included in Appendix A.

OIG RESPONSE

We are pleased that SSA has taken, or will be taking, steps to remind the regions to regularly assess the need for contact stations and that OFAM will be coordinating security assessments at contact station facilities. However, in response to the remote access issue, while we do not take exception to SSA's contention that reported problems are corrected, we do pose that many problems may be unreported. Therefore, we continue to recommend that SSA attempt to identify contact stations that have connectivity problems and resolve the technical issues. This will improve employee performance and provide better customer service.

SSA agreed with the need for an accurate contact station inventory but disagreed with our count assuming that we did not consider appointment-only contact stations. The 963 contact stations noted in our report as being "regularly open" to the public include those contact stations that were open for appointment only or had irregular schedules. We defined a valid contact station as one that could serve the public whenever considered necessary. SSA also reported that the new DOORS system would enhance the availability of operational information on individual contact stations. However, we remain concerned that the new system, like the old system, depends on managers for updates. We found the data in the old system to be inaccurate. Therefore, we continue to recommend that the regions be reminded to maintain an accurate count of contact stations and maintain updated contact station information.

While SSA maintains that the authority and discretion to advertise already exists, and that print material such as the 800-number is provided to field offices for advertising Agency services, we found media advertising to be inconsistent or lacking. In addition, we saw no evidence of the referenced printed advertising during our visits. Therefore, we still believe SSA needs to re-emphasize the importance of advertising. SSA also needs to re-emphasize how advertising can help ensure the effective use of resources at contact stations and inform customers of SSA's increasing array of services.

Appendices

Agency Comments

COMMENTS ON THE OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL (OIG) DRAFT
MANAGEMENT ADVISORY REPORT, "CONTACT STATIONS" (A-04-99-01001)

Recommendation 1

Require that regions comply with establishing long-range coordinated plans for managing contact station operations. Specific reviews of contact station workloads could be accomplished through the annual service delivery assessments already required by the Deputy Commissioner for Operations (DCO).

Comment

We agree that the regions should analyze field facilities, including contact stations, on a regular basis to ensure that service delivery is consistent with the needs of the area being served. The Social Security Administration's (SSA) Administrative Instructions Manual System (AIMS) 12.05 establishes national guidelines for reviewing facilities and conducting service delivery assessments. We will send a reminder notice to the regions to ensure that these reviews are performed as required.

Recommendation 2

Instruct the regions to review contact station sites to ensure they meet the basic requirements for conducting SSA business. This would include security for contact station staff and access to SSA systems to facilitate the work performed.

Comment

We agree with the intent of the OIG recommendation but not the proposed corrective action. Regarding security, all SSA facilities are required to have a Security Action Plan (SAP) as described in SSA AIMS chapter 12.06.11, attachment A, dated May 24, 1995.

On February 17, 2000, the Associate Commissioner for Public Service and Operations Support (OPSOS) issued a memorandum to all Regional Commissioners reminding them to review and update their SAPs. SSA as an Agency is already focused on making compliance with security policies to ensure protection of our employees a top priority. Also, contact stations are usually in free space provided by a third party as a community support activity. Therefore, SSA does not control the space and cannot legally alter or improve it. However, we can and do work with our hosts to ensure that the security and safety of our employees and customers are considered appropriately.

In 1997, the National Health and Safety Partnership Committee for Security (NHSPCS) developed procedures which provide guidelines for managers' use in evaluating location security, developing appropriate SAPs, briefing of employees traveling to contact stations and providing

additional security measures, such as duress alarms, preprogrammed cellular telephones, mirrors, etc., as required.

Additionally, the Office of Finance, Assessment and Management (OFAM) has asked the security contractor, Network Engineering Incorporated (NEI), to conduct security reviews of contact stations and make recommendations for needed security enhancements. To date, NEI has completed one survey and is scheduled to visit nine additional contact stations. OFAM staff will also conduct surveys of contact stations. Enhancements resulting from survey recommendations will be funded through the security tactical plan.

OIG implies in the report that the primary reason for establishing a Virtual Private Network (VPN) is to improve connectivity for remote users. This is not entirely accurate. The Agency is moving to VPN as it provides a more secure path to move data; offers increased user capacity as compared to Remote LAN Node (RLN); and improves connection stability and user access speed.

OIG notes that representatives indicated laptops worked infrequently or not at all because of "connectivity problems" and suggests that, pending the implementation of VPN, SSA needs to evaluate network technology used at the contact stations to resolve lingering problems with hardware and connectivity. Connectivity problems arise for a wide variety of reasons, such as faulty phone lines, phones unsuitable for RLN transmission or corrupt software on laptops. As the regions identify and determine the specific causes for connection failures, the Agency takes steps to initiate solutions.

Recommendation 3

Ensure the contact station inventory is accurate, and the site information included in the 800-Number Appointment System is up-to-date.

We agree. Beginning December 1998 (prior to OIG's review), OPSOS initiated steps to ensure the accuracy of our contact station inventory. A complete inventory of contact stations was conducted between December 1998 and June 1999. Regions are required to send quarterly updates to OPSOS on the number of contact stations they have in operation. In addition, on September 30, 2000, the new Detailed Office/Organization Resource System (DOORS) will go into effect. This system, which replaces TRIDE, will contain more detailed field office information (such as directions and office hours, for example) than was available in the old system, and will allow field office managers direct access to make changes. This should ensure that the information remains current.

In the report, OIG states that 963 contact stations are "regularly open" to the public, which is 482 locations less than DCO reported in October 1998. This finding does not take into account the fact that regions also report contact stations which are open for appointments only, or which have irregular schedules.

Recommendation 4

Direct regions to advertise the availability of SSA services by:

- Using local media to promote the services offered at contact stations or alternative service mechanisms if the intention is to reduce contact station service.
- Actively promoting use of the 800-number to reduce customer demand at contact stations slated for closure.

Comment

We disagree with the proposal to “direct” regions to perform these activities. We believe that, where appropriate, these actions are being taken. Regions already have the authority and discretion on a local basis to advertise the availability of SSA services, such as the national 800 number. Last year, OPSOS sent window stickers listing the 800 number to all field offices for display in a prominent place, visible even when the office is closed. In addition, SSA has made available many other service options such as filing claims immediately (ICT) or through the internet. National publicity of ICT and internet filing is scheduled to begin this fall.

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